reinforcement learning: planning and control through experience

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Abstract

Significant recent advances in Machine Learning have resulted in an explosion of interest in the field and its possible applications. Reinforcement Learning is a sub-field of ML which attempts to address the control question, including in the control of difficult-to-model, dynamic systems. Reinforcement Learning has undergone particular growth, with several recent high-profile successes. In this paper, I introduce the field of Reinforcement Learning, and describe its strengths and weaknesses to help the reader understand if the approach is appropriate for their control problem.

Keywords

Reinforcement Learning, Control Theory, Machine Learning, Artificial Intelligence.

Introduction

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Problem Statement

Imagine a child learning to ride a bicycle. From their senses, the child is confronted with a continued stream of useful information that describes the current state of their bicycle-riding adventure. For example, this data includes the angle of their handlebars, the amount of weight being shifted from one side of the bike to the other, the speed at which the bicycle is being ridden, an observation of the type of surface being ridden on, and any pain in their knee there may be from previous falls and scrapes. After many experiences and experiments, the child has sufficient data to learn to ride, maximizing the positive parts of the experience (euphoria from speed and independence, parental congratulations), while minimizing the negative aspects (falls, scrapes, embarrassment).

Mathematically, we attempt to describe this problem with a Markov Decision Process (MDP). An MDP is a tuple , where is the set of all states the problem might be in (in the case of a bicycle, this could include angle from upright, the angle of the handlebars, the current speed, the road surface, etc.); is the set of all actions the agent can take (turn the handlebars, pedal at some speed, etc.), is a transition kernel describing the probabilities of transitioning between two states when performing an action (, where ); is a reward function (for example, positive numbers for states in which the rider has reached a goal, or negative numbers for states in which the rider’s knee hurts), and is a discount factor, which is used to describe how much we prefer rewards in the short term to rewards in the long term.

The goal of the agent moving through the states of this MDP is to learn behavior (mathematically, a policy ) which maximizes the rewards received, as expressed by the Bellman equation, . This policy is learned from a number of samples of the form . A wide variety of approaches of learning effective policies exist, and have been active areas of research for decades.

Progress and Successes

The Bellman equation was introduced in the late 1950s. Progress in the decades since and other reinforcement learning fundamentals are best reviewed in Sutton and Barto (2018). Common experiments included some very basic control problems, including the Inverted Pendulum, in which a rod on a hinge must be kept balanced upright by moving its base left and right, and the Mountain Car, when an underpowered car in a valley must gain momentum by accelerating and reversing.

Very recently, however, neural network theory and GPU hardware have combined to produce some extremely effective agents on much more difficult problems. In 2015, Mnih et al. published a paper in which deep neural networks approximated the Bellman equation accurately enough to produce policies capable of playing many Atari games at a super-human level. In the few years since, deep neural networks have produced agents capable of performing a wide range of difficult planning and control problems, including robotic control, humanoid mobility, and the world’s best players of the games of Go and chess (for example, Shulman et al., 2015 and 2017; Mnih et al., 2016; and Silver et al., 2017 and 2018), all purely from experience and without any human modeling or knowledge.

This research has resulted in a number of easily-deployed algorithms that can learn useful policies on a wide variety of tasks. This opens the door for the application of RL to real-world control problems.

Advantages

RL has several advantages to traditional control theory in many types of problems. The biggest advantage to the RL approach to control is the fact that accurate modeling of the system is unnecessary. For example, in the bicycle-riding task described earlier in this paper, at no point does the scientist have to model any of the forces acting upon the bicycle. This can provide several benefits. First, it allows for control of difficult-to-understand systems (this is illustrated in related successes in language comprehension and computer vision). Second, there is no danger of an insufficiently accurate or detailed model resulting in a poor controller. Finally, if an RL agent can learn an effective controller without the effort of modeling, then human effort can be conserved.

A second advantage of RL is that of providing unforeseen solutions. This is perhaps best illustrated by the newest successes of RL in games such as Go and chess (Silver et al., 2018). These RL agents are trained with no human input, instead allowing an increasingly-adept agent to play against, and learn from, itself. The reward functions are non-zero only for victory states. In this way, the agent learns with no bias from a teacher or conventional wisdom how best to play the game. Winning moves have frequently surprised commentators, as the RL agent was able to find superior, unorthodox solutions to problems that had been analyzed by humans (and human-tuned computer programs) for centuries.

A third advantage of RL is in lifelong learning. As a system runs, the dynamics of the system may change. However, a traditional controller will not seek out new optimal behaviors as the system changes, making its behavior less and less optimal. An RL agent, on the other hand, can continually take in new information, tracking and following the optimal policy as the system changes.

Disadvantages

Despite its advantages, RL is frequently inappropriate for many kinds of problems. The primary drawback is a need for a very large amount of data. The modern approaches referenced in this paper use hundreds of thousands of training samples generated by simulator. While there are approaches in the field of transfer learning for modifying an agent trained on one domain with plentiful data for another without such data, some large amount of useful data needs to be generated or recorded. Additionally, this data requires a great deal of computing power to process during the learning stage, in the form of many GPUs or special-purpose computing chips.

Second, if the system is easy to model and is well understood, traditional control is likely a superior approach. In RL, the problem is derived assuming that the system is a black-box, and it is difficult to include previous knowledge in making the system easier to learn.

Third, the neural networks achieving the greatest practical results are extremely effective, but are not currently well understood. Theoretical understanding of neural networks is advancing quickly, but lags behind progress in experimental results. If it is important to understand why a control agent is making the choices it is, other approaches provide this understanding easier.

This lack of understanding also introduces possible cybersecurity flaws. Adversarial attacks (for example, Goodfellow et al. 2014, and Kurakin et al. 2016) and poisoning attacks (Shafahi et al. 2018) are being explored in other applications of neural networks, and it is likely neural networks for RL are similarly vulnerable. Research needs to advance before it is clear how big of a problem these attacks may prove to be.

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This section should be placed at the end of the paper before the **References** section. This section should include acknowledgments of financial, institutional and personal support.

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